Humanitarian Assistance Operations:

Time to Get on with the Job

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Humanitarian Assistance Operations:

Time to Get on with the Job

On April 6, 1994, Rwandan President Juvenal Habiyarimana died in a still-unexplained plane crash near Kigali International Airport. Within 48 hours, Rwanda descended into a chasm of unbelievable horror, as ages-old enmity between Rwanda's two main ethnic groups rekindled an intense cycle of hatred and violence. Within a few weeks, at least 500,000 Rwandans had died violently at the hands of their countrymen, while another million fled to perceived safety in gruesome refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania.

This brutal scenario was the means by which most Americans first heard of Rwanda. Satellite images of the misery of these forlorn survivors of an ongoing genocide shocked and moved the American people -- and surprised a government which had assumed, in the wake of a bitter experience in Somalia, that "passion fatigue" was the order of the day. The Clinton administration scrambled to mount a humanitarian relief operation that would respond to the expressed moral outrage of many Americans. The main vehicle for providing this aid was the American military.

The Rwanda aid mission thus became part of the ongoing debate on the U.S. military's role in providing humanitarian relief in the wake of natural and man-made disasters, which is the topic of this paper. Many observers and potential participants in such operations decried the misuse of the military instrument for such non-military purposes. "Our mission is to fight and win the nation's wars," ran the basic argument:

humanitarian assistance degrades our readiness for our primary mission, and draws resources away from training which is required for readiness. Another legitimate element of the debate concerned funding: would the military receive a timely supplemental funding allotment, or pay for this unplanned contingency "out of hide?" On the other side of the argument, proponents pointed to the military's unique capabilities -- particularly the ability to deploy rapidly to far-away locations -- as justification for their involvement in the mission.

Taking place in an unfolding post-cold war world, this debate was and remains symptomatic of the larger identity crisis facing both the military and the U.S. taxpayer today about what kind of military is needed today. In that context, this paper aims to examine the key lines of the debate over humanitarian assistance, seeking to gauge the status of the debate and to suggest what course the future will bring.

In fact, this debate has advanced considerably in the year since Rwanda imploded, although in Washington as in Clausewitz's theory of war, no outcome is ever final. Nonetheless, the military's role in humanitarian operations already has been enshrined in strategy and doctrine over the past year. President Clinton, in the preface to his February, 1995 revision of a "National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement" validated the Rwanda intervention (as well as Somalia) for

"saving hundreds of thousands of lives."[1] Humanitarian assistance, though explicitly acknowledged in that document *not* to represent a *vital* or even *important* American interest, is nonetheless held to contribute importantly to promoting democracy, itself one of the three fundamental pillars of the overall strategy.[2]

However, in that document are also clearly embodied the lessons of Somalia, which provide important constraining guidance on such intervention. As Clinton wrote, "No outside force can create a stable and legitimate domestic order for another society -- that work can only be accomplished by the society itself."[3] Clinton thus limited such assistance to clearly defined, temporary, and achievable missions. Clinton's strategy explicitly addresses the criteria for deciding whether to commit U.S. forces to a humanitarian action:

> The third category involves primarily humanitarian interests. Here, our decisions focus on the resources we can bring to bear by using unique capabilities of our military rather than on the combat power of military force. Generally, the military is not the best tool to address humanitarian concerns. But under certain conditions, the use of our armed forces may be appropriate: when a humanitarian catastrophe dwarfs the ability of civilian relief agencies to respond, when the need for relief is urgent and only the military has the ability to jump-start the longer-term response to the disaster; when the response requires resources unique to the military; and when the risk to American troops is minimal. Rwanda is a good case in point. U.S. military forces performed unique and essential roles, stabilized the situation, and then got out, turning the operation over to the international relief community.[4]

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[1] "A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement," February, 1995, pg. iii

[2] "National Security Strategy...," pg. 24

[3] "National Security Strategy...," pg. iii

[4] "National Security...," pg. 12

In March, 1995, the long-awaited U.S. National Military Strategy was published. It draws heavily from the Administration's "National Security Strategy" and explicitly emphasizes *selective engagement*, of which *peacetime engagement* is the first component. Peacetime engagement includes humanitarian operations, defined as follows:

> Our Armed Forces stand ready to participate in humanitarian and disaster relief operations at home and abroad. The U.S. military can offer unique capabilities in terms of logistics (transport, supply, and distribution), communications, and security. Often, our greatest contribution to these operations resides in our ability to rapidly respond when more traditional relief agencies are overwhelmed. After these organizations are "up and running," military forces can be withdrawn. A prime example of this concept is the recent U.S. assistance operation in Rwanda.[5]

Clearly, then, the selective use of the U.S. military to provide humanitarian operations has been endorsed at the highest level of U.S. military leadership and enshrined in military strategy. Ironically, considering the government's initial reticence to intervene, the operation in Rwanda has emerged as the model for such intervention: the quick "in-and-out." To amplify this point, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili, argues that "we can't hang out a sign that says, 'We only do the big ones.' We need to get used to these other missions."[6]

General Wayne A. Downing, who as Commander-in-Chief of U.S. Special Operations Command is probably more involved in the day-to-day business of humanitarian operations than any other senior

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[5] U.S. National Military Strategy (Working Draft), February, 1995, pg. 9

[6] Shalikashvili speech to National Defense University, January, 1995

U.S. military leader, is no less forceful in articulating his support -- indeed enthusiasm -- for these missions. Downing acknowledges the challenges they pose (e.g. limited language capabilities, excessive reliance on reserves for civil affairs personnel, etc.) and the discomfort of going "outside the box" toward a multilateral operating environment, but leaves no doubt about his Command's commitment to performing these missions.[7]

A further sign that the U.S. military is taking General Shalikashvili's advice to heart was represented by the Army's publication in December, 1994 of Field Manual (FM) 100-23, Peace Operations. "Peace Operations" is an umbrella terms which encompasses a broad range of activities going beyond the scope of this paper to include far more difficult, dangerous, and controversial activities like peace enforcement and peacekeeping. Nonetheless, the manual specifically addresses the question of humanitarian assistance operations, and very usefully identifies for field commanders eight "Principles of Humanitarian Action in Armed Conflict." Most of these are intended to provide guidance on cooperation and interface between armed forces and non-governmental and private voluntary organizations (NGOs and PVOs) involved in the relief mission.[8] In the joint arena, humanitarian assistance is addressed in Joint Pub 3-0, albeit only briefly, albeit only under the vague heading of "Other Civil

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[7] Downing March, 1995 speech to National War College

[8] U.S. Army, FM 100-23, pg. 26-30

Support Operations."[9]

Again, beyond these specifics, the main point is that humanitarian operations have been embraced officially at the joint and service levels, in addition to the national and military strategic levels. Word that "we don't only do the big ones" *is* spreading rapidly to become an accepted part of military doctrine. The Army's demonstrated maturity in producing FM 100-23 was applauded by the *New York Times* as "worth a look by [those] interested in knowing whether the Army is adjusting to its new role in the post-cold war world. The short and reassuring answer is, yes." The *Times* editorial also highlighted the next challenge before the Army: turning these principles into practice through training and exercises.[10]

In the context of this debate, the question inevitably arises whether humanitarian operations represent a new mission for our armed forces. The answer to this question clearly is "no." Historian Samuel P. Huntington cites the official Army history, with reference to the 1920s and 1930s (like today, a period when the utility and cost of military forces were under strong challenge): "The most conspicuous employment of the Army of the United States... was in a variety of tasks that only the Army had the resources and organization to tackle quickly. In floods and blizzards and hurricanes it was the Army that was

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[9] Joint Pub 3-0, Chapter V, Military Operations Other Than War, Pg. V-1 -- V-16

[10] New York Times, *Army Peacekeeping, by the New Book*, January 3, 1995, pg. 18

first on the spot with cots, blankets, and food."[11]

In a similar vein, Jonathan T. Dworken of the Center for Naval Analyses points out that "... the military has a long history of [such] operations. The Marine Corps alone has participated in approximately 100 such operations since 1825." Dworken argues that humanitarian assistance operations may become the military's most common mission of the future. In addition to Rwanda, the recent past is replete with similar examples: Hurricane Andrew (Florida, 1992), Provide Relief and Restore Hope (both in Somalia, 1992), Provide Comfort (Kurdistan, 1991-present), Sea Angel I and II (Bangladesh, 1991), etc.

Dworken also identifies eight discrete tasks which are the main building blocks of such operations: relief delivery; economic reconstruction; health service support; rules of engagement; psychological operations; coordination with the State Department; coordination with coalition forces; and coordination with the United Nations.[12] Whether or not Dworken is proven right about the future frequency of humanitarian assistance operations, his isolation of these eight elements is useful in addressing one of the enduring objections to these operations: their impact on training and readiness. According to an officer

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[11] Maurice Matloff, editor, *American Military History*, pg. 413, as cited in Huntington's *New Contingencies, Old Roles*, appearing in JFQ, Autumn, 1993

[12] Center for Naval Analyses, *A Chronology of U.S. Marine Corps Humanitarian Assistance and Peace Operations*, as cited in Dworken's article, *What's So Special about Humanitarian Operations?*, printed in Comparative Strategy, Volume 13, pg. 391-399

of the Army's 10th Mountain Division who served in both Hurricane Andrew and Somalia in 1992[13], there is much positive training value to be derived from these missions. The most obvious advantage is that these are *real* operations, not mere training exercises, but nonetheless conducted (if our National Security Strategy is heeded) at minimal risk to our forces. The value in terms of Dworken's final three coordination tasks (all of which involve non-DOD assets) cannot be overestimated, and certainly cannot be replicated in a pure training environment. Though not mentioned by Dworken, an additional benefit is experience in working with PVOs and NGOs -- a key skill also required for more dangerous Peace Operations. Ample practice in fulfilling the other five tasks is also derived from humanitarian operations.

On the negative side, according to the previously cited officer, participation in an unplanned humanitarian assistance contingency generally produces a delay of three to five months before full pre-deployment readiness is recovered. In addition to reestablishing the pre-mission training cycle, personnel changes, including deferred leave and transfers, must be implemented after return from the mission. For every unit deployed, another has just returned and a third is readying itself for the next deployment cycle, resulting in a trebling of the impact beyond the single unit actually deployed at a given moment. Additionally, repairs to equipment degraded during the mission may not be performed until necessary funding is provided,

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[13] Lt. Col Peter Madsen, USA

which often takes months. These are the main costs to such missions, which the military is quite correct -- indeed, has a duty -- to make known to civilian policymakers *before* deployment orders are issued.

The main shortcoming of the above arguments against participation is their mostly technical nature and the fact that they are better understood by soldiers than by laymen. For many Americans outside the military, the relevant facts are simple: we spend $250 billion per year (more than the cost of all the world's other militaries *combined*) to support a military organization in the face of no identifiable threat to our national security over the coming ten years. If tragic circumstances somewhere on earth so move our people that they demand deployment of some of the military's unique capabilities to provide humanitarian relief, the military must comply. If a vital or important national interest later is compromised by the diversion of military assets to humanitarian operations, the solution is to redeploy those assets as efficiently as possible to the higher priority task. Period.

Our strategies and doctrine accept this reality, as do our senior military leadership. If some of those soldiers charged with the tough task of implementing humanitarian aid missions in desolate places like Eastern Zaire and Northern Iraq are not eager to perform them, we ought to understand -- but we must not concur. What we may be witnessing here is the usual lag between the adjustment of doctrine and the issuing of orders by

leadership and their acceptance by the troops and incorporation into routine.

The final and perhaps most difficult point of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations concerns their funding. If Dworken's prediction about their future frequency is right, we urgently need to establish parameters and to set procedures for funding these operations without resort of ad hoc, after-the-fact supplemental funding requests. These supplementals -- and their uncertainty -- will inevitably dampen the military's willingness to undertake them. In fact, if these missions do proliferate in the future without a secure funding mechanism, they eventually will make a complete mockery of the complex DOD budget process by rendering it irrelevant: the actual disposition of DOD funds will not be determined by the budget process, but rather by politics -- interagency politics, inter-service politics, and politics between the parties and between the branches of government -- as accounts are raided to fund unplanned contingencies which have already been performed or are still under way.

What is the current trend? The Clinton Administration in early 1995 requested $2.9 billion to cover FY 1994 contingencies like Rwanda and Haiti as well as a $300 million contingency fund to cover future missions. At this writing, the Congress has not decided how to respond, but the indications are not encouraging. There is a clear inclination not to provide any additional funding, but rather to transfer previously appropriated funds

from such unrelated accounts as foreign aid to Jordan and environmental clean-up for base closures.[14] While there are important issues of Congressional vs. Executive authority at stake here, it is incumbent on both branches to work out a responsible compromise solution which will enable the military to go about its business with greater certainty about its funding.

In conclusion, the "glass" on the issue of humanitarian assistance operations appears to be mostly full, and getting fuller. Leadership, from the National Command Authority on down, has made clear its acceptance of this mission, buttressing policy with doctrine and, perhaps some day soon, with predictable funding. The griping one hears occasionally about humanitarian operations (which in fact precipitated the topic selection for this paper) appears to be a natural response to change and may be on the decline.

On a broader level, lingering reticence about humanitarian operations may be a symptom of the military's newly ambiguous status in American society following the cold war and the halcyon budget days of the 1980s. No doubt it is also a reflection of the fact that, as noted above, these operations usually involve extremely hard work under difficult circumstances in "austere" surroundings. Lest we forget, this is exactly the environment in which most Americans imagine their military best performing their unique and essential roles and missions. Accordingly, the sooner

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[14] "House, Senate Narrow Defense Budget Gap," Washington Post, April 5, 1995, Pg. 4

the military adjusts fully to the frequency with which they are called upon to perform roles like this which fall short of "the big ones," the more quickly will be settled the broader debate about the military's place in post-cold war American society. In other words, it is time to get on with the job.